

Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING), 1, 5, June, 2016, pp. 97-102
DOI: 10.4458/6964-09



A matter of ethics and cartography. The map of the ambassador and the map of the journalist

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Received: April 2016 – Accepted: May 2016

Abstract

Instead of being a neutral technical product as is generally believed, geographical maps are the subjective representations of a precise vision of spaces and the holders of performative power. This article uses the example of maps that give different interpretations of the political situation in the Crimea, disputed between Russia and Ukraine, in order to reflect on the plurality of possible cartographies and the reasons giving rise to them. The choices of the two real protagonists of the incident being described, an ambassador and a journalist, express two different ways of interpreting maps. Continually disputed between those wanting it for the synthetic description and those using it for an analytical interpretation and those evaluating it for its legal value, maps are thus epistemologically uncertain and ethically delicate objects.

Keywords: Crimea, Ethics, Geopolitical Maps, Narratives, Performative Power

1. Introduction

The reality perceived through the senses is always changing and uncertain. This is the essence of the imaginary journey that leads Parmenides to the home of the Goddess of Justice (Dike), who shows him the existence of two paths of knowledge: one of truth (*aletheia*, *ἀλήθεια*) having reason as its source, while that of opinion (*doxa*, *δόξα*) has the senses as its source and is always illusory and misleading. Two different pathways of knowledge are also present in the event that I am taking cue from in order to reflect on the ethics of cartography and on the ambiguities that the traditional inter-

pretation of geographical maps still generates, according to which it is a neutral technical instrument and not a partial and subjective cultural product.

2. Two irreconcilable narratives

The event is the following: on December 30th, 2015 on the website of the Italian journal of geopolitics *Limes* a map was published showing the Crimea with the same colour as Russia, a solution which in the language of political cartography indicates sovereignty (Figure 1).

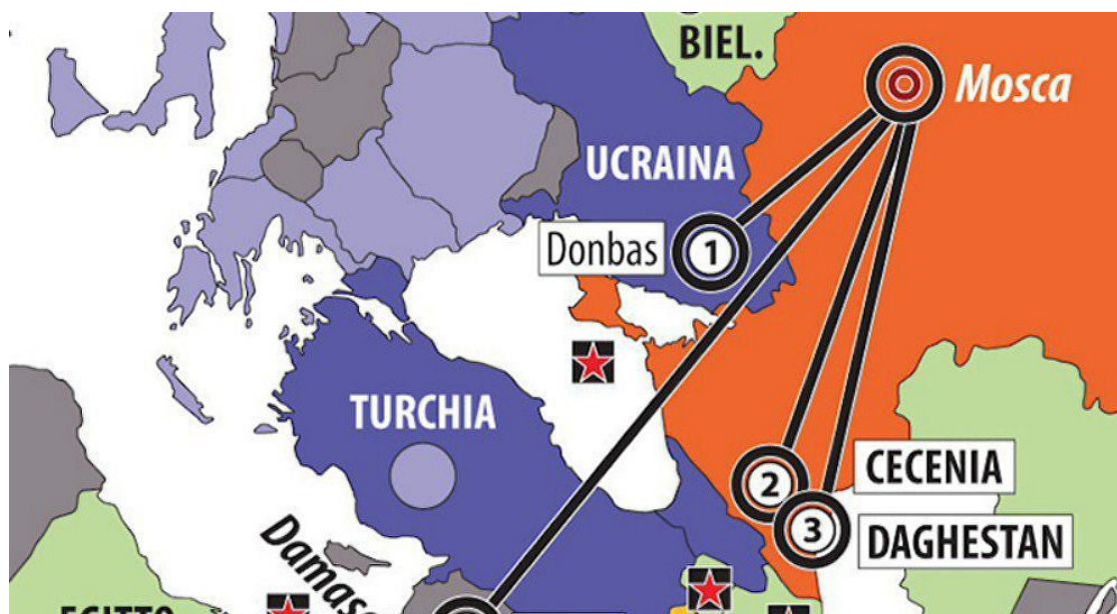


Figure 1. Detail of a map that appeared on the website of the journal *Limes* on December 30th, 2015.
Source: <http://www.limesonline.com/perche-limes-rappresenta-la-crimea-sotto-la-sovranita-della-russia/88930>.

The representation is different from the political maps usually found in circulation, where instead the Crimea has the same colour as the Ukraine, a state whose sovereignty is almost unanimously recognised by the international community¹. The *Limes* representation was not the only cartographic representation that made the Crimea part of Russia. Prior to this the very popular *Google Maps* had been diplomatic, if not ambiguous and opportunist: in its Russian version the Crimea was Russian and in the Ukrainian one it was Ukrainian, for all the others the sovereignty seemed rather undefined. Also other protagonists of cartography on the web such as *OpenStreetMap* and *Bing Maps* had adopted solutions of convenience (<https://hi-tech.mail.ru/news/new-krym-maps/>).

¹ In the days following the deposition of the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, an insurrection organised by Russia took control of the Crimea, putting a pro-Russian government in charge. A successive and controversial referendum a few weeks later decreed the annexation of the Crimea to Russia. Protests by the Ukrainian government and most of the international community followed, that accused Russia of having violated the territorial integrity of the Ukraine.

In perfect coincidence with the publication of *Limes*, again on December 30th, 2015 the Russian branch of *Coca Cola*, on the occasion of the publicity campaign for the New Year, published a Christmas representation of Russia on the most diffused Russian social network (*Vkontakte*) where the Crimea did not appear (Figure 2).

The protests by users led the multinational to make an immediate correction. In publishing the correct map (correct for some but not for others, obviously) *Coca Cola* complied with the solution already adopted previously by their rival *Pepsi Cola* and made an official apology: “Dear community members! We sincerely apologize for the situation. The map has been fixed. We hope for your understanding” (Figure 3).

Immediate new protests from the Ukraine this time made quite a stir. The far right leader Oleh Tjahnybok exploited the incident, asking for the boycotting of *Coca Cola* in his country (<http://ria.ru/world/20160105/1355039648.html>).

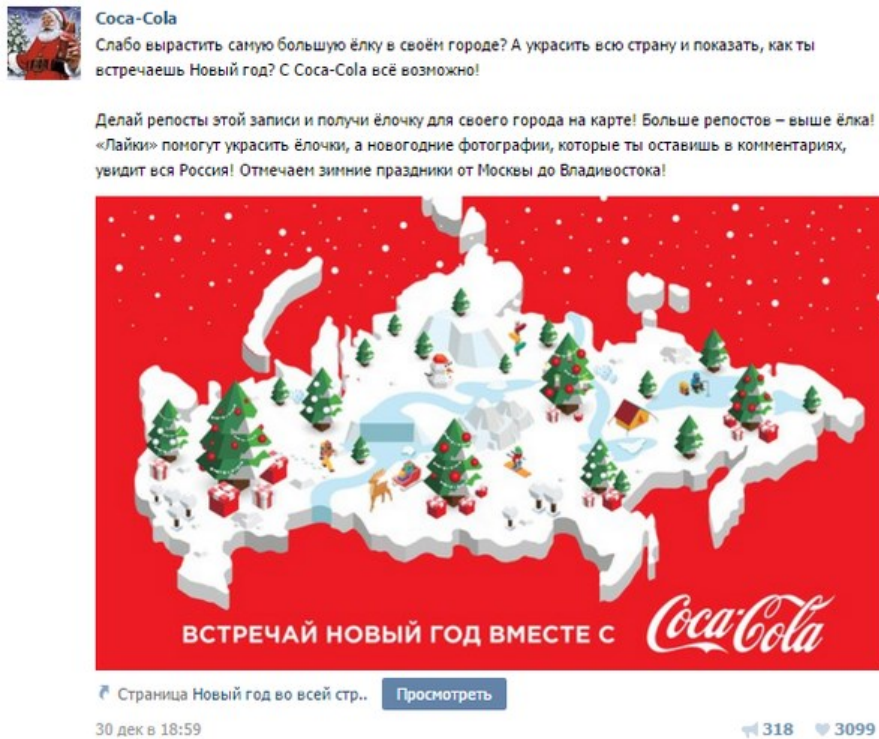


Figure 2. Bring in the New Year with *Coca Cola* (first version).
 Source: <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20160105/1032723513/coca-cola-map-russia-crimea.html#ixzz45WP1Gi9g>.



Figure 3. Bring in the New Year with *Coca Cola* (second version).
 Source: <http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/cocacola-made-russia-very-angry-and-started-a-boycott-in-ukraine-with-this-map--bJ1mPv8xnx>.

Other similar incidents have become more and more frequent in the last months. In listing them, the Spanish daily newspaper *La Vanguardia* (January 15th, 2016, p. 12) also cites the case of *Limes*, which was far from being over with the publication of the map but had a particularly meaningful follow-up. In fact the editorial initiative fuelled the diplomatic protests of the Ukrainian ambassador in Italy who, just as the ambassador in France had done a few months beforehand with regard to the 2016 edition of the *Larousse* atlas, publically expressed his protest by signing a letter sent to the editorial staff of the journal and diffused by the Facebook profile of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on January 9th, 2016². The editor of the journal immediately replied to the ambassador in no uncertain terms, stating the reasons for his choice³. The news of the controversy spread thanks to numerous news releases and went on in the following weeks with other official declarations from the embassy, to which the

² This is the text that the public could read on Facebook, where the Italian version was preceded by that in Ukrainian: “In reference to the publication on the site of the journal ‘*Limes*’ of the map of the Russian Federation including the Crimea, the Ambassador of the Ukraine in Italy E. Perelygin has made an appeal to the Editorial staff of the Italian journal of geopolitics to change the map of Russia in conformity with the internationally recognised frontiers of the Russian Federation. Therefore, continues the Ambassador to the editorial staff, “I would like to consider such omission a merely technical error and not a provocation that would represent a challenge directed at the territorial integrity of the Ukraine, completely ignoring the consolidated position of the European Union and the UN with regard to the non-recognition of the occupation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation” (<http://italy.mfa.gov.ua/it/press-center/news/43704-karta-ukrajini-u-vidanni-limes-maje-buti-privedena-u-vidpovidnisty-do-norm-mizhnarodnogo-prava>).

³ In his reply the editor wrote: “Dear Mr. Ambassador, in relation to the public appeal you kindly made to me, I would like to point out that the map to which you refer reflects the actual reality. When the Crimea with Sebastopol returns to actual Ukrainian sovereignty, we shall do everything to produce a map representing such reality. I am certain that you will agree with me that for a journal of geopolitics to neglect the reality of the situation would be a technical error” (<http://www.limesonline.com/perche-limes-rappresenta-la-crimea-sotto-la-sovranita-della-russia/88930>).

journal replied by informing all its thousands of readers of the incident in the January 2016 issue of the paper edition.

The verbal crossfire triggered reactions over the web which took the form of hundreds of comments posted on the two sites. Some contested that fact that the map “legitimised an unacceptable abuse of power” and others recognised the limitations of the representation: “A map is evidently less flexible than politics” (comments to be found at <http://www.limesonline.com/perche-limes-rappresenta-la-crimea-sotto-la-sovranita-della-russia/88930> and <https://www.facebook.com/limesonline>). The controversy rebounded on other websites and social media. Obviously the Russians were the most grateful to the journal, as is shown by the thousands of hits on the Russian site *Sputnik* which reported the news (Figure 4). Among the many comments there those who in their defence of the journal addressed the ambassador and all those who were of his same opinion with an emblematic sentence: “Get it into your heads, *Limes* is not *De Agostini*”⁴. Even if perhaps unaware of this, the Author had underlined a very important point: the existence of a plurality of cartographic discourses, all legitimated by one specific point of view and thus all irremediably subjective. There is the ambassador’s discourse, which is one of institutional, formal and abstract cartography, and there is the journalist’s, which looking at the actual level of political reality interprets it as being closer to reality.

3. The moral of this story

The incident raises a number of questions: why didn’t *Limes* correct its map while *Coca Cola* did, as well as apologising for the mistake which for many is not a mistake? But, above all, why didn’t the Ukrainian ambassador intervene with just as much formality when articles appeared in *Limes* or other media outlets explaining Russia’s reasons and instead did so at the moment in which a map appeared in the journal?

⁴ The *Istituto Geografico De Agostini* is an historic Italian cartographic company with a solid reputation for a scientifically rigorous production and in line with the official political viewpoints.



Figure 4. Italian Publication Finally Understands Crimea is Part of Russia.

Source: <http://sputniknews.com/world/20160109/1032884477/italian-magazine-crimea.html>.

The answer to the first question is simple: the *Coca Cola* map was aimed at promoting the company brand and more inclined to meeting the political-geographic tastes of the customers of the rich Russian market while the *Limes* one accompanied a geopolitical analysis carried out autonomously by political power addressing a by and large neutral public like the Italian one.

Equally simple is basically the answer to the second question too, which refers to the difference between a written article and a map. The official status of the map assigns an authoritative value to it as if it were a notary of the territory; a cadastral map, for example, proves the ownership of a piece of land. In this way, for the ambassador the *Limes* map risks certifying the official Russian possession of the Crimea. It is just as simple to explain why the journalist used it (and self-produced it): because for him the map has no authoritative value but an informative and interpretative one; since it must be functional in the analysis of the real ongoing dynamics, it tends to record the actual situation, and if such situation has not (yet) been officially recognised this matters very little.

The point of the incomprehension is thus clear: two different concepts of the value of the map, with the ambassador terrorised by seeing a situation taking shape (even if only in the cartographic symbols) that the state that he represents refuses; the journalist on his part, anxious to explain the details of the incident to his readers. The latter refuses all charges because he does not feel that he has any responsibility, and it is evident that his maps do not have the power to officially decree a political situation. But are we really sure that his map is irrelevant in the interpretation of the political reality?

Here comes into play the question of the performative value of cartography, so powerful as to overturn the relations of performative power on the land and the one proposed by maps, generally wrongly considered in favour of the former. Traditionally, maps are seen for their descriptive function: a visual device that shows the territorial distribution of a given element or phenomenon. Instead, they go well beyond this, not only for their capacity to reveal, as

demonstrated by many Authors⁵, as above all for their marked ability to construct a reality and stimulate actions that are coherent with such construction, that is, actions that intervene on the territory to adapt it to what is foreseen by the map (Dematteis, 1985, pp. 95-103; Jacob, 1992, pp. 48-52, 350-352 and 384-386; Wood, 1992; Farinelli, 1992, pp. 65-70; Ó'Tuathail, 1996, p. 31; Casti, 1998, pp. 22-34; Minca and Białasiewicz, 2004, pp. 31-48; Dell'Agnese, 2005, pp. 27-29; Besse, 2008).

In this viewpoint, the map is a formidable instrument of ontological production of reality, an extremely efficient agent for the construction of places. As the power of visual imagination contributes considerably to creating the conditions of intelligibility of reality by the thinking subject, it can be deduced that the by-product of reality is not the map but exactly the opposite.

By applying these considerations to our case of the Crimea, it seems that the performative potential of the map is perfectly clear to the ambassador, while the journalist appears to (or pretends to) underestimate it: the *Limes* map does not prove the Russian annexation of the Crimea but promotes its acceptance with the public.

While accounting for the material and im-material factors of international relations, at the same time geopolitical maps powerfully stimulate the senses and emotions, ending up creating narrations of international politics that affect its understanding and in the long run can have repercussions on concrete reality.

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⁵ For example Svetlana Alpers ("Maps enable us to see things that are otherwise invisible"; 1983, p. 195) and Christian Jacob ("Maps invite us to see and think about what cannot be seen or thought when observing the real space"; 1992, p. 50; both translated from the Italian editions).